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ABSTRACT

The concept of complexity in decision-making can be found in several lines of conceptualization in the area of national and international decision-making. One derives from the classic works on authoritarianism and dogmatism (Adorno, et al., 1950; Rokeach, 1960). Another approach relies on the variables that pertain to group dynamics and to behavior under stress (Janis, 1972, 1982). Similarly, situational theories posit that people under stress focus on partial information and make other stimulus-bound decisions without considering long-term outcomes and strategies. Psychologists familiar with these approaches have concluded that international decision-makers should be steered away from simple toward complex cognitive processes. There does seem to be a positive correlation between quality and the level of complexity that leads to decisions. But it is important to note that the correlation is circumscribed by environmental specifics. The leader who must respond quickly to a clear-cut danger, or is in the position of negotiating with an opponent who is implacably committed to a particular outcome, or is involved in an all-out conflict upon which major national values--or even national existence--depend, may have limited or no scope to afford flexibility. Social scientists need to devise a meta-theory that identifies characteristics of situations that require or reinforce simple approaches. (BZ)

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Authoritarian Thinking, Groupthink, and Decision-Making Under Stress: Are Simple Decisions Always Worse?

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The concept of complexity in decision-making can be found in several major lines of conceptualization in the area of national and international decision-making. One derives from the classic work on authoritarianism and dogmatism (Adorno et al., 1950; Rokeach, 1960). It postulates that some people are predisposed toward following rather simple rules in processing information, applying those rules rigidly, and consequently leaning toward simple solutions to problems. Given that problems and relevant factors tend to be complicated, simple solutions tend not to fit: Q.E.D., people who are prone to authoritarian/dogmatic/simple thought processes are likely to make bad -- or at least not optimal -- decisions (see, e.g., Dixon, 1979).

Another approach relies on the variables that pertain to group dynamics and to behaviour under stress. Janis's "groupthink" concept (1982/ 1972) is based on such factors as high group morale and self-esteem, which lead to conformity, rejection of dissent, failure to appreciate other points of view, lower likelihood of seeking information or advice from outside the group, and so on. Groupthink decisions, then, like authoritarian decisions, tend not to be very good ones.

Similarly, situational theories posit that people under stress focus on partial information, fail to search for more information, adhere rigidly to preconceived plans even when these may be unsuited to changing circumstances, or alternatively make stimulus-bound decisions without considering long-term outcomes and strategies. Again, simple decision rules lead to simplistic decisions. Psychologists familiar with these approaches have concluded that international decision-makers should be steered away from simple toward complex cognitive processes, whether by selection, training, institutionalized procedures, expert advisors, or a combination of these (e.g., Janis & Mann, 1977).

Noncognitive factors also play important theoretical roles. Thus, the authoritarian personality is not merely bad at decision-making; it also involves a host of neurotic and maladaptive behavior patterns, and of course a special orientation toward Fascism and Nazism of the 1930s-40s variety. As a more recent commentator has noted, "authoritarianism" connotes many things besides attitudes toward authority, most of them negative (Ray, 1971). The more situationally oriented approach of Janis and others covers not only cognitive errors in decision-making but also affective and affiliative "rules" (Janis, 1986). These so-called rules are seen as distorting decisions, in all cited examples for the worse, just as do their cognitive counterparts (e.g., Kahneman et al., 1982).

The general argument has a seductively logical ring to it. If the problem situation is complicated, simple approaches to the solution must by definition ignore some of the relevant factors, and therefore will be suboptimal. Two basic questions are not answered. One is the meaning and nature of "simple approaches" and of decision outcomes; the other is whether simple approaches to complex problems are really always wrong.

Defining and Measuring the Variables. No real analysis has been made of the concept of simplicity in the general context of high-level decision making. However, the definitions all focus on the rigid following of certain rules. This is true whether one is dealing with authoritarianism, dogmatism, low cognitive or conceptual complexity, or non-vigilant problem solving, in the sense respectively of Adorno et al. (1950), Rokeach (1960), Schroder et al. (1967) and Janis (1985). All of these constructs involve a lack of flexibility, the ignoring or avoiding of dissonant information, limited information search, and a tendency to rely on a few, overlearned strategies rather than adjusting one's decision rules to the situation. A basic question is whether these characteristics represent stable personality dimensions,

universal pre-programmed tendencies, best-available responses to environmental demands and pressures, or an interaction among these. Adorno et al. and Rokeach, among others, appear to favor the first option; Janis, the second; and Schroder et al. the last, with a bit more weight on personality than on the situation. Clearly, a great deal of research and thought remains to be done before we really understand this concept; and understand it we must, to rescue the original hypothesis from mere circularity.

Let us now look at the measurement of decision outcomes. Improving on most authors in this area, Janis (1986) explicitly denies the assumption that the use of simple decision rules in itself differentiates between good and bad decision-making approaches. Rather, he argues, a good approach is one that is not dominated by such rules, although it may sometimes incorporate them. Unfortunately, after thus rejecting the simple rule that simple rules are bad, in actuality he goes on to characterize them as "symptoms of defective decisionmaking" and to rate the quality of decisions as high, medium or low depending on how many of these "symptoms" he finds in them.

But is it really true that the use of the availability heuristic, or of what Janis calls the "retaliation imperative" -- which other psychologists call aversive reinforcement, or punishment, and which history has shown to be quite effective in many cases -- is evidence of defective decisionmaking? If such tendencies are indeed consistently maladaptive, why have they not dropped out of the human repertoire? Evolution should have screened out of the gene pool those unfortunate human beings who, otherwise competent, insisted on basing their decisions on salient images or analogies (the availability heuristic), the example of a leader (authoritarian identification), or an unshakable moral code (dogmatism). Where did evolution go wrong?

I don't think it did go wrong. To begin with, critics of simple decision strategies measure them against some hypothetical standard of

perfection, the economist's or political scientist's ideal of a rational actor. Given the facts that no one is completely rational, that no one has access to all of the relevant information, that time is never unlimited, that the situation is constantly changing, and so on, I would guess that the commonly used heuristics frequently make decisions possible, and optimal in the circumstances. Such rules, stereotypes, and prototypes serve the function of arriving with reasonable cost-efficiency at satisficing, if not perfect, solutions which should not be denigrated. It is easy for the social scientist, who knows the eventual outcome of the decision, to look back and criticize; but the valid assessment of choices should be based on the situation as it appears at the time of decision, not years later.

Even with hindsight, many cases are difficult to judge. Kennedy's handling of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis was for a long time cited as an illustration of good decision-making; Janis (1982/1972) listed it as a non-groupthink example, and later (1986) found only one symptom of defective decisionmaking in it. More recently, however, some commentators have severely criticized the trade-off that saw the Castro regime given a guarantee of noninterference and the rapidly following withdrawal of US missiles from Turkey in exchange for the restoration of the status quo of no Soviet missiles in Cuba. Similarly, Janis (1986) finds the decision to drop atomic weapons on Japan as an example of what he calls the "Wow! imperative", in that Truman and his advisors saw this move "as a master card, not only for the purpose of bringing a rapid end to the war in Japan, but also for demonstrating U.S. arms superiority in a way that would help contain the Soviet Union after the war." Janis does not demonstrate in what way this perception was mistaken, and many historians would probably find that in the situation of summer 1945 it was quite valid.

A related difficulty is that social scientists tend to consider problems and solutions on a case-by-case basis. But a real-life choice has effects not only the next decision, but also on the environment in which that next decision will be made. A retaliatory or punitive response may not be the best solution to a particular problem; but the demonstration that one is willing to make such a response may prevent the next potential problem from arising, or from becoming a crisis. This is a serious flaw in the study by Janis (1986). He got experts to rate the short, medium and long-term outcomes of 19 US policy decisions. The outcomes were rated on impact on American goals and interests, and on world tension, during the days, weeks, months and years following each decision. Data analysis showed a relationship between defective decisionmaking (by Janis's terms) and outcomes, but only in the short run; expert judgment of medium- and long-term consequences were so unreliable as to be useless. A national decision-maker might be very doubtful indeed about the relevance of this study to the selection of strategies!

Last, shared value judgments bias the assessments of social scientists. One is the perhaps occupational syndrome of preferring broad information gathering, meticulous examination of all possibilities, consideration of alternative points of view and positions, and deferring closure until a maximum level of certitude has been reached. That is how we test hypotheses and design research; but it is not necessarily the best way, nor even necessarily a feasible way, to direct national and world affairs. Social scientists also tend to prefer democracy, egalitarianism, and peace. In some of our own research, for example, we have shown that the outbreak of war is consistently preceded by reductions in information-processing complexity; but this cannot really be equated to a relationship between reductions in complexity and wrong decisions. There may be cases where going to war is indeed the optimal solution to the country's problems.

Complexity and Outcome. Leaving aside the difficulty of valid assessment of decisions and their consequences, let us look at situations where even theoretically, complexity may not be optimal. One such case is in simple situations, where rapid response may be crucial. Schroder et al. (1967), for example, devote most of their book to the desirability of complex information processing; but they do point out that under certain circumstances simple processing may be better. Imagine an infantryman on the battlefield, who hears his sergeant shout, "Hit the ground!" He will probably not survive long enough to take all factors and points of view into account, integrate them, arrive at a decision, and then act on that decision; he would be better off with a simple, authoritarian submissive, act of unthinking obedience. This, after all, is why drill, practice and rehearsal play such a large role in training and education.

While few high-level decisions may require instant responses to salient punctate stimuli of that sort, those that do tend to occur in critical situations where much is at stake. Here, the ability to perceive similarities (and differences) between the current situation and those previously encountered and successfully solved may be crucial. When an appropriate repertoire already exists, a focus on its dominant, most overlearned response can be adaptive when it really counts. In his simulations of managerial decision-making, Streufert has found that the ability to shift from complex to simple strategies when an emergency occurs is an important component of successful coping (Streufert & Swezey, 1986).

A more common situation in political decision making is the need to follow a clear-cut approach, consistent with a stated ideology and without swerving or flinching. Suedfeld and Rank (1976), in a study of revolutionary leaders, found that retaining major leadership roles after the revolution's success was a function of switching from a simple to a more complex

information-processing mode. This change occurred as the individual moved from rebelling to ruling; and being complex before that move was just as fatal as remaining simple past it. The pragmatic imperative of complexity after the revolution takes power is fairly clear: former enemies, domestic and foreign, now have to be neutralized, conciliated or even converted; the complicated task of rebuilding social, political and economic systems without alienating major segments of the population must be undertaken; former fighters, both allies and enemies, must be reintegrated into a peaceful life.

But why must one show low levels of complexity during the revolution? Our hypothesis is that the level of dedication and single-mindedness required by that situation is reflected in simple approaches to choices. The revolutionary leader does not admit that there is much to be said for the government against which he is fighting, nor that his own cause may be somewhat tainted. Tetlock et al. (1984) have interpreted this as impression management, and it is clearly true that a leader who violated the general principle would lose the admiration of his followers and the support of his colleagues. He may even be suspected of being a government agent. But I disagree with the implication that simplicity is deliberately assumed as a ruse; I think that it is a real response to situational characteristics that reinforce simple rather than complex approaches.

Another situation that favors simple decision-making is where decisive behavior is more important than the specific choices made. For example, the establishment of one's legitimacy as a ruler may require both the trappings of traditional authoritarian leadership -- pomp and ceremony, parades and brass bands, uniforms and banners -- and the making of decisions firmly, rapidly and unilaterally. This inspires confidence in the leader, and may also strengthen his self-confidence, both of which can be crucial (Suedfeld, 1983). It is probably not coincidental that international crises are frequently marked by a

drop in the integrative complexity of statements made by high officials, although the causal direction is moot (Suedfeld & Tetlock, 1977; Suedfeld et al., 1977). Recall the anecdote cited in Tetlock's recent analysis of psychological contributions to foreign policy (1986). To the suggestion that President Kennedy should be exposed to many viewpoints before making a decision -- a typical piece of pro-complexity social science advice -- Dean Acheson replied that the President does not need to be warned; he needs to be given confidence. And, let me add, others may need to be given confidence in the President!

One more example is that of the decision-maker confronting an implacable and determined antagonist. In such cases, it may be necessary to present an equally impervious front to the enemy. Would a simplistic show of unyielding resistance by Britain and France have stopped Germany's sequence of aggressions leading to World War II? Chamberlain's maneuvering certainly failed to do so; and his level of integrative complexity in one sample of reports from the 1938 Munich conference was almost 50% higher than that of Hitler.

I am not arguing that simple solution strategies are not sometimes, or even frequently, worse than complex ones. Nor should we really conceive of complexity as a dichotomous variable when in fact it is a continuous dimension. I am willing to posit, at least tentatively, that there is a positive correlation between decision quality and the level of complexity that leads to that decision, complexity being defined in any of the major ways summarized in this paper. But what is important to note is that the correlation is circumscribed by environmental specifics. The leader who must respond quickly to a clear-cut danger, or is in the position of negotiating with an opponent who is implacably committed to a particular outcome, or is involved in an all-out conflict upon which major national values -- or even

national existence -- depend, may have limited or no scope to afford flexibility in goals, admit legitimacy in the other side's point of view, take time to consider all of the contradictory information, etc. Negotiated compromises in which each side gives up something, although they are usually considered optimal by social scientists, may not always be possible in international conflict; and even when they are possible, they may not be the most desirable option.

This is the other hand. Social scientists need to work on identifying characteristics of situations that require or reinforce simple approaches. and policy advisors and critics should take these factors into consideration. rather than Good decision-makers may be those who have an intuitive understanding of the level of complexity appropriate to the occasion. In evaluating those decisions, critics should judge the match between complexity levels and relevant environmental characteristics, rather than equating the signs of simplicity with the symptoms of deficiency. A meta-theory, dealing with how we decide how to approach a particular decision, must take into account the flexibility of complexity as well as complexity itself, and must provide guidelines for assessing relevant aspects of the environment. What we do not need is more simplistic exaltations of complexity.

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